

A CONSEQUENCE OF THE BODY



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A Consequence of the Body

Cheska sits in the back of your mind, black hole hungry. You rub the spot behind your left ear like it will quell her somehow, but it doesn't—of *course*, it doesn't—and you're pulled under the riptide of memories: the soft pink of her watermelon lip balm and kisses on sidewalks exchanged under the neon glow of a convenience store sign; sun-drenched afternoons sweetened with queso sorbetes in bread buns and Cheska's laughter; the smell of her cheap perfume when she—

You bolt upright, so fast that the memories momentarily crash and recede. Beside you, Ted is still in a fitful sleep, a knuckle-white grip on his pillow. You move slower now as you get up, careful not to wake him, and you stare at the imprint your body leaves on the bed. When you walk away, you imagine leaving Cheska behind, resting in the sheets rippled in the shape of you.

But when you finally pad across the tiled floors and lock the bathroom door behind you, it's still Cheska's face that stares back at you in the mirror, her curly hair wild and her dark eyes wary. You snarl and Cheska snarls back, and the sweet face from Ted's memories turns sour. You smile and the Cheska that Ted remembers returns, so you smile wider and wider, until the corners of your mouth nearly overtake your cheekbones, until your synthetic skin is pulled so taut that it threatens to rip.

"Cheska," you say, testing her name on your lips—your name now.

The name is soft with affection when Ted says it, relishing the first syllable before gently releasing the second, but the hard consonants crunch against your teeth. Ches-ka. Ches-*ka*. You spit the chewed-up syllables out, wondering if you say it enough times, the borrowed name will settle like your borrowed face, or the real Cheska will appear like a Bloody Mary covered in broken windshield glass, vengeful as she yanks the wires from your chest, wearing your snarl as your systems shut down. You wait, but nothing happens. You give up, press a kiss to the glass.



Ted fucks you in the morning, but it's Cheska's softness you see in your head. You go through the motions, knowing exactly what your face looks like as he moves because you're thinking of hers. You are also thinking of her laugh and the hand-drawn stars on the toes of her red high tops and the dark

streaks in her colored hair, the way she slouches in chairs and the birthmark on her knee and the last time Ted saw her happy before the truck jackknifed into the car. You think of her head through the windshield, bits of glass decorating her hair like diamonds.

Cheska tugs on the fragmented secondhand memories again, threatening to pull you under as she tries to stitch herself back together, but this isn't what your algorithm was made for. If you were a proper clone, you would've received a full consciousness transfer—the kind where you close your eyes in a flesh body and wake up in a synthetic one, your algorithm only meant to fill in the inevitable cracks from the transition. But Cheska's brain was too damaged in the crash, so it's Ted's memories and Ted's love and Ted's grief that swim around your internal hard drive, all held together with a pirated Girlfriend program. You don't have a childhood or secrets or dreams or a conscience, and you're left to extrapolate a person from the ghost of a ghost.

When Ted finally grunts and rolls off you, you lie there, unblinking. He cries, and the algorithm fails again.

The part of you that is programmed to want to please Ted tries to gauge the best way to comfort him. You know that when Cheska cries without making a sound, she wants to be left alone until she's ready to find you; or that when Cheska chews on her lip as she sulks, she wants to be prodded into talking about what's bothering her, to be reassured that her burden is yours, that it's okay to take up space. But you have no sample data for reading Ted, and you are still learning what

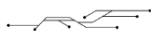
it means to *look* instead of to be looked at. The part of you that *is* Ted thinks he deserves his pain, and the part of you that is supposed to be Cheska doesn't say anything at all.

You decide to wait as Ted takes shuddering inhale after shuddering inhale. Ted gets like this sometimes—when he plays with your hair in the soft early mornings, and he catches the distinct smell of silicone and steel lingering underneath the scent of Cheska's coconut shampoo, or when he wraps his arms around you and sighs into your shoulder, and realizes that he can't feel your heartbeat against his.

You understand his grief in an abstract sort of way. Not the pain, exactly, but you are an incomplete data set, an algorithm running on loop, so fixated on Cheska that you have constructed yourself in the shape of her absence. Ted is not so different. You are both made of loss.

Usually, he sorts himself out, one way or another. He might pull you closer, clinging to you so tightly you'd bruise if you were capable of it, and beg for Cheska's forgiveness—forgiveness for crashing the car, for having you made, for not being able to let her go just yet. Or he'll decide that he can't stand the sight of you, and he'll scald himself in the shower like he can burn away his shame or your touch while he locks you in a flimsy plastic-wood closet for days, sometimes weeks. But he always comes back for you. And he'll lavish you with affection until his next breakdown, so maybe it's all the same in the end.

This time, he cries a little longer, and the tears running down his face remind you of raindrops spilling in through the cracks in the windshield, slipping down Cheska's dark skin and pooling with her blood. He takes a breath like a dying engine, then he reaches for you.



You've only been with Ted for three months when the credits run out. You aren't surprised. Ted spent all the money he and Cheska saved for the wedding on your down-payment, and the little he makes off his salary goes to paying off the rest of your installments. He starts working double shifts, and when that's not enough, he sells his collection of vintage Pokémon cards. Cheska loved those cards, or she loved the way Ted loved them, or Ted loved the way he thought she loved them. You have difficulty telling the difference, and you don't understand the attachment or their value, but Ted reluctantly lets them go to keep you.

He never complains out loud, but there's a desperation to his movements now when he reaches for you, and when you're not enough, he starts reaching for the vodka too, drinking like he's trying to drown himself. You are aware that he might need help, but getting help might mean getting rid of you, and Ted insists you are the only thing he needs.

You ask yourself what Cheska would do, and you remember her cool lips pressed to feverish skin and pills handed with blue Gatorade and a promise. Cheska would take care of him, you decide, and maybe you *can* be enough. It's

not like you want to return to the backstreet clinic in Quiapo he bought you from anyway, that grimy place tucked between an abortion clinic and a chop shop, so you pour him another finger of vodka when he asks for one.

It's his third tonight, or at least the third that you know of, and he's already red from the alcohol and the heat. A low whine escapes Ted's throat as he fumbles with the vodka. His grip slips and the glass shatters when it hits the floor, the clear alcohol pooling in the cracks of the tiles. You automatically reach to pick up the broken glass, and a shard slices your ring finger. You cry out because it's what Cheska would do, and Ted grabs your hand to check the wound.

There's no blood. You shouldn't be surprised, but you honestly hadn't given it any thought before. This skin is not yours, and *Made in China* is embedded into the base of your spine like a bone-deep tramp stamp, and, apparently, plant-based meat replicates bleeding better than you. The absurdity of it all makes you pause, and your retina scanner momentarily fills with static. You angle your hand to inspect the cut, and the fluorescent light seems to catch on something. Glass, maybe, so you lean in closer, pressing on the cut as you try to get a better look.

Ted yanks your wrist back. You realize too late that while you were looking at the cut, he was looking at you. You should be feigning pain, and your features contort too quickly to be natural. Ted stumbles to his feet, dragging you with him, and it's a miracle neither of you steps on the glass. You think he might lock you in the closet again, but instead, he sits you on

the bed and grabs a bandage from the bathroom. He kneels in front of you, and for a moment, you see Cheska's face from half a year ago, her eyes shining as she pulled Ted up for a kiss after he slipped a ring on her finger. You blink the image away.

"Ted?" you say, but he doesn't move, and maybe he's lost in a memory too.

His hair has gotten so long lately that you can't see his eyes, but his shoulders shake like he's crying. You move to brush the hair out of his face like Cheska used to, but he flinches back and your hand hovers in the space between you. Ted hiccups, choking on air. Then, he takes your hand in his, and his touch is surprisingly steady as he bandages the cut. When he's done, he presses a butterfly-soft kiss to the pad of your finger.

That night he curls up against you and you expect him to cry again, but he doesn't. You squeeze the arm wrapped around your waist. You think he's fallen asleep when he whispers, "You were supposed to be just like her."

You shift in his arms so you're facing him. His eyes are closed, but this is the first time he's spoken to you as *you*, so you look—really look—at him instead. You stare at the scar on his forehead and the bruises underneath his eyes, his cracked lips and his hair ruffled by the breeze of the electric fan. You try to see what Cheska saw, wonder if this is the same Ted that Cheska knew.

“Sometimes I look at you, and it’s like I don’t know you at all,” he admits, voice rough. “But you’re made from *my* memories. I’m scared it means I never really knew her either.”

You want to point out that he cannot know *you* when you do not know you, when you cannot even think of yourself as an *I* because in all of your preloaded memories, you are a *you*. You are made from the gaps in his memories. You are what’s left of a person that has been sifted through, that shapeless mass, settled. You want to say that it doesn’t matter, really, because you are here, and she is not and what he does and does not know about her now is all you are and all you can ever be. But you know this isn’t what he wants to hear.

A list of pre-programmed platitudes scrolls through your mind, but he never reacts well to those. You don’t have enough sample data to predict what Cheska might have said in a situation like this either, so you settle for the truth, or something like it. “You know the parts of her you loved,” you say. “Isn’t that enough?”

He opens his eyes, his gaze flitting across your features. For the first time, you don’t know what he sees. He sighs.

“It should’ve been me,” he says instead.

You shrug. “It wasn’t.”

“I wish it were.”

And you think of Cheska and her love of discovering hidden gems at secondhand shops and buying knickknacks while stuck in traffic and making mood boards for a book she

always planned to write someday, and you wonder if she would've felt the same.

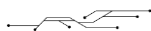
Later, when you're sure he's asleep, you trail your bandaged finger along his jaw. You imagine the skin leaping apart at your touch. You think of Cheska and the car, of blood and steel and bone. He shudders. You roll away from him and unwrap your finger, then you press down hard on the cut like you wanted to. There's still no blood and no glass, but in the moonlight, you know you almost see *something*.



The cut doesn't heal. After a month, it becomes clear that you're not like one of the expensive models whose skin will knit itself back together with time. Ted pretends he doesn't see it, but there's a hesitance to the way he touches you now, and he flinches when he sees you playing with the bandage on your finger. Sometimes he yells when he catches you, the alcohol an accelerant fueling his rage. It's progress, you think, the second stage of grief. You don't quite know what will happen to you if he ever reaches acceptance, but you know you won't let yourself go back to the clinic. You won't be another returned model to be stripped and reskinned.

When you are alone, you peel back the bandage and hold your hand up to the light, trying to see that something again. The glass didn't actually cut through the thick layer of synthetic skin, so you decide to help it along. Ted will never see it anyway, so, every day, you tug the skin apart a little more and a little more until it threatens to rip.

In those moments, Cheska is finally quiet, like she's watching too, and for once, you do not have one foot planted in the past. You tug and tug and tug until one day, the skin in the very center of the cut finally gives way and tears open. It's...satisfying. This, you think, must be what it feels like to finally stop holding your breath. You jam a finger into the cut to wedge the skin apart and turn your hand to the light. Then, you see it—glinting. Calling.



Ted starts to watch you more closely, or as closely as he can when he's home and sober. A part of you likes his suspicion, likes that you have a secret. You're not allowed outside, so when he is away, you take a knife from the kitchen, and you make a dozen tiny cuts in your skin, short but deep, in places Ted will never find—between your toes and along your scalp, in your navel and the skin behind your left ear. You replay a memory of Cheska poking holes in the lid of a jar when she caught a beetle on a whim during one of her visits back home to Bulacan. *To let it breathe*, she said, patting the jar affectionately. Two days later, it died anyway.



Ted comes home late, again. He finally stumbles in a little past midnight, so drunk that he trips over his own feet when he tries to toe his shoes off and put on the slippers by the doorway. He crashes hard into the wall, hard enough to rattle the picture frames that Cheska insisted on hanging. She liked

old-fashioned things like that. She used to call it retro, and Ted used to call it pretentious, but he would still let her spend a small fortune on real photo paper. Now, he snatches a frame off the wall and brandishes it like a weapon when you step off your charging station to help him.

“Don’t come near me,” he slurs. “Get away!”

“Ted,” you say, pinching the bridge of your nose in mimicked annoyance. “What are you doing?” You don’t say that you have nowhere to *get away* to anyway, not in this apartment’s suffocating smallness, outside always off-limits.

His body goes rigid, his grip on the frame tightening. “Don’t do that,” he says.

You scowl. “Don’t do what?”

“Don’t pretend to be her! I don’t know *what* you are, but you’re not—you’re not *her*,” he says, then he presses his forehead against the picture frame and begins to sob. “What am I doing?” he asks. “What am I supposed to do?”

He’ll probably lock you in the closet again later, but you approach him anyway because he is hurting, and you think this is what Cheska would have done. You’ve barely taken a step in his direction when he swings the frame. The metal bites into your cheek.

The force of the blow knocks you to the ground, and your mind becomes static, freefalling through infinite loops of Cheska. You feel her trying to remake herself one more time, tearing through lacerated memory after lacerated memory.

But the shape of her won't hold, and she collapses into herself, falling further and further inward, a void shoring herself up.

Then you see Ted, screaming at you, trying to pull you out of your bottomless silence. Blood drips from his hands, seeping into the cracks in the picture frame and soaking the smiling image of Cheska and Ted from the day they got engaged.

"I'm sorry," he cries, crouching down next to you, cradling your face and smearing blood—*his* blood. "Cheska, please don't leave me. I can't bear it. Not again. I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. Cheska, please."

When Ted realizes you are awake, he crushes you against his chest, his entire frame quivering. His heart beats against your damaged cheek. You go on autopilot and push him away to get up, then you guide Ted to his feet as he stares at you with fear-wide eyes. He leans heavily onto your side, and you bear the brunt of his weight as you half-carry him to bed. You don't bother with turning on the light.

"This is all my fault," he says, as you lay him down, smoothing the hair away from his face. "It should've been me. It should've been me."

You nod because you understand now: this is not a Ted that Cheska would have recognized. This is not a Ted that Cheska would have loved. But this is the Ted you have. And a part of you is still programmed to want to please him.

"Forgive me," he says. "Please."

You straddle him and kiss him slowly, blood soaking your dress when he puts his hands on your hips. You think of Cheska fumbling for these hands in the dark, of her quickened breaths and the gasp of his name before she stopped breathing altogether. You think of her warmth and her blood and her face staring back at you.

You want her so badly, it's almost human.

You slide your hands through Ted's hair, down his cheeks, and along his jaw. You can't be her and you can't be with her, so you decide to care for Ted the way Cheska would. Love is supposed to be selfless, so you give him what you can't have. You wind your hands around his neck and squeeze.

He gasps against your lips and his eyes shoot open. You pull back to smile at him, that perfect Cheska smile with soft eyes and barely-there dimples that he loves so much. You want this to be the last thing he sees, to remember Cheska as he knew her. He tries to buck you off, but he is human-soft and you are steel, and you merely squeeze tighter. He claws at your arms, your hands, nails tearing at you, desperate, careless.

"It's okay," you say, and his head jerks. To you, it looks like a nod. "It's your turn now. You can be with her."

He chokes something unintelligible as his movements slow, and you think he understands. His nails still dig into your arms, but he's weaker now and it almost feels like a caress. It feels like reassurance.

By the time you let him go, he's not breathing, and his pulse has stopped. You close his eyes and smooth out the creases in his expression, then you untangle his body from the sheets and pull them up to his chin though his skin is slick with sweat. You've never seen him perfectly still like this. Even in sleep, he has always been restless. Chasing after Cheska, maybe. Trying to save her. Trying to catch up. It's nice, you decide, to see him at peace. You think this is what Cheska would have wanted for him too. You press a kiss to his forehead, then you leave him to his rest.

When you finally pad across the tiled floors and close the bathroom door behind you, Cheska stares back at you in the mirror. You smile and she smiles back, and you lean in close. The light catches on the gaping cut on your cheek, and for a moment you see you—the real you—beckoning you to meet them. You take off your bandage and your clothes, and you stand there, bare and black hole hungry. You laugh because you can. You smile wider and wider until the skin splits, and the world cracks open. You rip your girl-skin apart, finally unravelling, finally letting go.



About the Author

Sydney Paige Guerrero may or may not be a robot herself, though she thinks of herself in the first person and still finds it odd to write in the third person for bios.

But if you really must know, she is the co-editor of *Mapping New Stars: A Sourcebook on Philippine Speculative Fiction*, for which she received a Word Fantasy Award in 2025 and a National Book Award in 2026, and she teaches at the University of the Philippines, Diliman, where she graduated with a degree in Creative Writing. Her fiction has won two Nick Joaquin Literary Awards, and has appeared in *Daily Science Fiction*, *Apex Magazine*, *The Philippines Graphic*, *Cast of Wonders*, and other venues.

In 2024, she attended the Clarion Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers' Workshop at UC San Diego as that year's George RR Martin Sense of Wonder scholar.

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